

**Review of *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*, by Alison McQueen  
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018)**

[Penultimate version, forthcoming in *Hobbes Studies*, 2020]

Enzo Rossi

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam  
PO Box 15578, 1001NB Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
[e.rossi@uva.nl](mailto:e.rossi@uva.nl)

An apocalypse, Alison McQueen tells us in her masterful first book, is ‘*an imminent and cataclysmic end to the known world, along with its attendant “evils”. It is a rupture in the apparent temporal continuity of history, a revelatory moment around which the past is given meaning and a radically new future is announced.*’ (p. 56, emphasis in original). According to most interpreters, the realist tradition in political theory is dismissive of such drama: politics is, rather, a slow grind hampered by largely invariant obstacles. Through original readings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Morgenthau, McQueen makes a convincing case for rethinking that interpretive quasi-consensus. She also draws some historically-informed normative implications that chime with some of the re-evaluations of the role of apocalypticism and utopianism within contemporary realism in normative political theory.<sup>1</sup>

The book unfolds as follows. The first substantive chapter contains an erudite synthesis of the vast literature on the biblical origins of the apocalyptic tradition, a discussion of its role in Jewish and early Christian political theology, and a more abstract characterization of the apocalypse as a “social imaginary” (p. 53), which sets the stage for tracing apocalyptic themes in early modern and modern political thought, and up to the present. McQueen’s contention is that realists have, and have exhibited, two distinct strategies for dealing with apocalyptic attitudes in politics: rejection or redirection. That is to say, a debunking of the anti-political (and thus unrealistic) character of apocalypticism, or a way of resisting apocalyptic narratives by reappropriating them. For McQueen, Machiavelli adopts the former strategy, but only after a flirtation with apocalypticism. The interpretive idea is that the *Prince* is influenced by the cathartic apocalypticism of puritanical Florentine preacher Girolamo Savonarola—so much so that the work’s final chapter contains a call for prophetic leadership at odds with Machiavelli’s gritty realism, and which he will only fully reject in his later work. McQueen’s Hobbes also writes in the shadow of an apocalyptic imaginary, namely the one built around the upheavals of the English civil war. Unlike Machiavelli’s, Hobbes’s

---

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Gordon Arlen and Enzo Rossi, Must Realists Be Pessimists About Democracy? *Moral Philosophy and Politics* (forthcoming); Raymond Geuss, “Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie”, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (2014): 419; Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi, “Political Realism as Ideology Critique”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (2017): 348; Paul Raekstad, “Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 26 (2018): 145; Enzo Rossi, “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible”, *Constellations* 26 (2019): 638; Gearóid Brinn, “Smashing the State Gently: Radical Realism and Realist Anarchism”, *European Journal of Political Theory* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119865975>; Ben Cross, “Radicalizing Realist Legitimacy”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719857129>.

reaction is one of straightforward rejection: apocalypticism is dangerous insofar as it fosters motivations beyond material security, and so Hobbes must create—rather than describe—a new political subject, for “Only egoistic, self-interested men who fear violent death will be fit to obey their sovereign” (p. 144). The final figure in McQueen’s realist triptych, Morgenthau, has a more complex, or at least more mutable relationship to apocalypticism. The early Morgenthau rejects the dream of liberal internationalism, “at the root of which he sees an apocalyptic hope for a final and decisive war that will usher in an age of permanent peace. Like Machiavelli, Morgenthau rejects the apocalyptic imaginary, turning instead to a tragic worldview that insists on the inescapability of conflict and the limits of transformative political action.” (p. 190). However, in McQueen’s reading the later Morgenthau, faced with the possibility of all-out nuclear warfare, embraces an apocalyptically transformative view of politics: “he defended the very kind of aspirational project for perpetual peace that he had once condemned as a ‘repudiation of politics.’ Utopia had become a necessity.” (p. 191). Those three interpretive exercises—to which I can hardly claim to have done justice in the limited space available to me—are then drawn together in the final chapter, in which McQueen assesses the two realist responses to apocalypticism, rejection and redirection. The upshot is that, while both strategies carry costs, the redirection strategy is preferable. Rejecting apocalypticism altogether may be “a morally appropriate response to the dangers of the apocalyptic imaginary” (p. 199), yet such a strategy should be used sparingly if realism is not to become marred by excessive status quo bias, and at any rate unable to deal with genuinely novel political predicaments. Whereas, for all its risks (which for McQueen are Manicheism, political withdrawal, and resignation), redirection may be politically advisable to the extent that “evoking apocalyptic fear may be an appropriate response to prospective catastrophes such as nuclear war and global climate change.” (p. 203).

To the extent that I’ve any observations to make about the book’s argument, they concern that normative conclusion. But to get there it is worth dwelling briefly on McQueen’s methodology. The above summary should have made clear that the core of the book is interpretive, or historical. McQueen’s attention to the political circumstances in which each of her three authors write points towards a broadly contextualist approach. Yet the book goes beyond the standard “Cambridge School” methodology—hence the closing normative reflections I’m about to return to. This is worth emphasizing: McQueen manages the rare feat of making canonical authors speak to our concerns while keeping her reading anchored in their context, thus avoiding both the political sterilization-by-historicization one finds in much history of political thought, and the ventriloquizing of the classic that is especially common in North American political theory, and which often results in poorly concealed appeals to authority.

What to make, then, of the normative reflections McQueen draws from her interpretive work, and of the way she draws them? I want to suggest that the two questions are closely related. Other reviewers have rightly pointed out that there are other possible realist responses to apocalypticism;<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Vassilios Paipais, “Review of *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 18 (2019): 45; Joshua Cherniss, “Review of *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*”, *H-Diplo*, 2018, URL: [https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/4921828/h-diplo-roundtable-xxi-7-political-realism-apocalyptic-times#\\_Toc20846190](https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/4921828/h-diplo-roundtable-xxi-7-political-realism-apocalyptic-times#_Toc20846190) [Accessed 20 July 2020]

though that is hardly a pressing concern unless such alternative responses can be found in the work of one of the three authors at hand—this is, after all, a primarily interpretive monograph. Yet once the two strategies are identified and critically discussed, and so brought into the present, as it were, one may ask questions that go beyond the canonical authors’ framing of the issues at hand. So let me conclude by trying to bring in a theme from contemporary political realism that I think could fruitfully extend McQueen’s discussion of the rejection strategy. As I noted at the outset, McQueen’s argument resonates with the recent re-evaluation of realist utopianism. This is most clearly true of her discussion of the redirection strategy, since it offers a window onto a possible realist approach to seemingly intractable problems, climate change *in primis*. However I would like to suggest that recent developments in the realist literature may also suggest a road not taken by the proponents of tragic view of politics that leads to the rejection of apocalypticism. McQueen offers this consideration against the tragic view:

... insofar as it is committed to a severe epistemic and practical humility about politics, the tragic worldview is vulnerable to a familiar charge that it amounts to an apology for the status quo. [...] The complexity of our political world means that we will not be able reliably to control and anticipate the effects of our actions. For both thinkers [Machiavelli and Morgenthau], epistemic and practical humility about politics is a salutary bulwark against violent utopian and apocalyptic enthusiasm. (P. 198)

I do not wish to cast doubt on that reading of Machiavelli and Morgenthau. I do however think it is possible to query the pairing of epistemic and practical humility, and that that in turn may lead to a different appreciation of the anti-status quo potential of the tragic worldview. I take it that epistemic humility about politics refers to our inability to predict the future, whereas practical humility refers to our inability to achieve our ideal outcomes the future. Now it seems to me that those two forms of humility only go together so long as we take realism’s sensitivity to the tragic facts of politics to be centred on facts about political feasibility. But I submit that we may consistently retain realism’s tragic sensibility while jettisoning the concern with feasibility. On such an approach, the crux of realism is not feasibility but anti-moralism.<sup>3</sup> Imagine, for example, a form of Adornian negativism that does not refrain from a ruthless critique of the status quo’s ideological distortions (so not a moral critique but one based on revealing the true nature of social relations, which could be as bleak as a truly tragic worldview requires). At the same time such a critic can be aware of the absence of a concrete pathway to systemic political change in the foreseeable future. Importantly, such a perspective doesn’t require epistemic humility, neither in terms of refraining from judgment about the workings of social relations, nor in terms of making predictions. To be sure, such an approach would tend to give up on much of the immediate action-guiding aspect of theorization, but this would not result in the “kind of paralysis” McQueen imputes to the tragic worldview, which in her reading is “consumed by the worry that our political actions will always escape our intentions” (*ibid.*). That just isn’t a worry here, though a related worry may remain, namely that this may “leave the status quo—however unjust—in place by default” (*ibid.*). There’s a sense in which that may be true. But there’s another sense in which it isn’t. Offering a critique of the status quo, even without a concrete strategy for changing it within the foreseeable future,

---

<sup>3</sup> I develop this line of argument systematically in “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible”.

need not be the same as leaving the status quo in place. After all, practical humility itself cautions against ruling out that a future revolutionary will fruitfully draw on our once powerless critique of the status quo.

## References

- Arlen, Gordon and Enzo Rossi, 2020. Must Realists Be Pessimists About Democracy? *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, forthcoming. URL: <https://philpapers.org/rec/ARLMRB>
- Brinn, Gearóid, 2019. “Smashing the State Gently: Radical Realism and Realist Anarchism”, *European Journal of Political Theory*: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119865975>
- Cherniss, Joshua, 2020. “Review of *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*”, *H-Diplo*, 2018, URL: [https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/4921828/h-diplo-roundtable-xxi-7-political-realism-apocalyptic-times#\\_Toc20846190](https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/discussions/4921828/h-diplo-roundtable-xxi-7-political-realism-apocalyptic-times#_Toc20846190) [Accessed 20 July 2020]
- Cross, Ben, 2019. “Radicalizing Realist Legitimacy”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2019): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719857129>.
- Geuss, Raymond, 2014. “Realismus, Wunschdenken, Utopie”, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58: 419.
- Paipais, Vassilios, 2019. “Review of *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*”, *Contemporary Political Theory* 18: 45.
- Prinz, Janosch and Enzo Rossi, 2017. “Political Realism as Ideology Critique”, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20: 348.
- Raekstad, Paul, 2018. “Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 26: 145.
- Rossi, Enzo, 2019. “Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible”, *Constellations* 26: 638.